

Elizabeth THOMPSON, *The Pioneer Woman: A Canadian Character Type*, (Montréal, McGill-Queen's, 1991, \$34.95 cloth, ISBN 0-7735-0832-5)

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Americans with a complex make-up of southern food, soul-food, Muslim food, and health food. Cooking skills keep alive food traditions which foster a sense of identity as well as the ability to function and to acquire a healthful food supply.

In comparing the different methodologies used, we ponder the question of the influence of the chosen methodology on the findings of a study. Would a method closer to the women of Oaxaca and more expressive of their own perceptions have shown a little joy in their lives along with the misery? "Decision Analysis in Nutrition Studies" by Sutti Ortiz adds to the book not because its economic decision-making model is a useful tool, but because its author gives a good critique of the limitations of the model and when its use is inappropriate. In most of the studies in this book, such a deterministic model would have forced the researcher into more of an outsider, so-called objective stance, and shown only thin rather than the thick textured realities of the dynamic food systems worked out in the domestic domain.

The authors' work shows differences in their nutrition knowledge. It is not without bias, not unaffected by their own beliefs. Although the editors point out the relevance of this work for other disciplines, they could very well also consider the benefits of collaborative work with other disciplines, such as folklore studies. Personally I found much on which to reflect: different methods showing complexities of foodways; degrees of insider/outsider participation; varying interpretations of the richness of dietary improvisation; and the inventiveness of the human spirit in solving problems of diet in domestic life.

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Elizabeth THOMPSON, *The Pioneer Woman: A Canadian Character Type*, (Montréal, McGill-Queen's, 1991, \$34.95 cloth, ISBN 0-7735-0832-5)

In her fiction and non-fiction, Catherine Parr Traill wrote about pioneer women rising to the challenges of settling a new land. Elizabeth Thompson argues that this depiction did more than introduce prospective English emigrants to the realities of Canadian life. With her portrayal of the "pioneer woman" Traill

created a female character type that has been reinterpreted many times since, so that the pioneer woman has become an accepted and essential aspect of female characterization in Canadian fiction. Thompson believes this character type is possibly unique to Canada and represents part of what Northrop Frye described as our "imaginative continuum".

Elizabeth Thompson traces several forms of the pioneer woman stemming from the ideal depicted by Catherine Parr Traill. She explains that the image of the pioneer woman remained applicable in Canadian literature even after there were no more pioneers in Ontario. The "pioneering process" changed over time as the frontier which was no longer a real physical place became a metaphor for social and religious conflict. She argues that Sara Jeannette Duncan presented a new kind of frontier in her work as she tackled some of the major issues and dilemmas faced by Ontario women at the turn of the century, such as the right to higher education and equity in labour market. A new version of the pioneer woman — for example Advena in Duncan's *The Imperialist* — looked elsewhere for proof of competence, and even superiority, after Canada's physical frontiers were conquered and blazed a frontier of social attitudes and issues. Thompson concludes that although no direct link can be established, "it is evident that by Duncan's time the pioneer woman had become a Canadian archetype" (87).

Elizabeth Thompson looks next to Ralph Connor for incarnations of the character type. In his writings set in the backwoods of Ontario, the Canadian north-west, and prairie country, Connor depicted heroines who brought about change in men and women around them without changing their own essential goodness and in so doing served as a model for other women. Thompson interprets this as a version of the pioneer woman, this time used by Connor as a religious metaphor.

Finally, Thompson ends the imaginative continuum with Margaret Laurence. Laurence's women have ability to show courage, resourcefulness and pragmatism, to accept adverse circumstances with equanimity, and to act decisively in the face of discomfort or danger. Elizabeth Thompson identifies these female characters as versions of the pioneer woman facing internal, personal frontiers.

Thompson presents an interesting thesis here but I am not as certain as she that "the continuity between Traill's characterization of women and the characterization of women in subsequent Canadian fiction cannot be denied or ignored" (5). The theory of the pioneer woman as a recurrent metaphor for Canadian femininity would be more convincing if Thompson clearly defined the pioneer woman character type. Instead, she chooses only to list several essential qualities: the ability to act decisively and quickly in emergencies; the strength to accept adverse circumstances on the frontier; and the courage to attempt an improvement of these frontier conditions (8). The generality makes me question how unique the type is to Canadian literature. Surely if one is free to interpret "frontier" in

a social, religious or personal sense, there are many international examples that one could argue fits this definition.

Thompson's thesis is based on the work of Traill, Duncan, Connor and Laurence with scattered, cursory allusions to a few other authors. Drawing largely on literature from Ontario, Thompson could often better substitute the word "Ontario" where she writes "Canada". Even limited to these authors the theory sometimes seems forced. For example, in speaking of Catherine Parr Traill's work, she describes *Canadian Crusoes* as a further development in Traill's conception and use of a Canadian female character type from *Lady Mary and Her Nurse*, although she notes that *Canadian Crusoes* was actually written four years before *Lady Mary*. Also, while Thompson compares female characters in Traill's work written before and after the authors immigrated to Canada, it is not clear enough — for me at any rate — how they differ in the essential "pioneer woman" qualities Thompson outlines.

As I read through Thompson's book, I had many unanswered questions, besides the thesis's applicability to other texts. I wondered how far her book moved us beyond the controversial "survival" theory proposed by Margaret Atwood in 1972. Also, while applying the frontier thesis to the Canadian context may be a worthwhile exercise, our settlement was not, as Thompson suggests "a slow movement from East to the West and the North" (6). She does not acknowledge the heartland/hinterland pattern that more closely characterizes Canadian settlement; nor does she comment on its relation to the frontier thesis. While her idea of a female character type is a fascinating one, she misses the opportunity to explore just what kind of metaphor for Canadian femininity the pioneer woman provides or what common perception it reveals of a woman's role in Canadian society. What kinds of power do female literary characters exercise?

Despite its limitations, the book reminds readers of the many independent, active women in Canadian literature. It raises the question for folklorists of what female character types populate the nation's folk literature. This kind of exploration is just beginning as Kay Stone, Carole Carpenter, Pauline Greenhill and others look at traditional songs and narratives collected in Canada with an eye to female character types. Thompson's work encourages us to think of extending this re-examination to other forms of folk narrative. For example, many of the women who are the subject of local character anecdotes in Canada exhibit the same essential qualities Thompson identifies in the pioneer woman. *The Pioneer Woman: A Canadian Character Type* encourages a re-reading of texts from a feminist perspective, offers a reinterpretation of active female literary characters, and explores one largely female imaginative continuum. All these concepts hold

relevance for new studies of folk literature that extend beyond an examination of traditional public space (male) genres and include a feminine voice and imagery.

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Dan YASHINSKY (collector), *Tales for an Unknown City*, (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990, pp. 265, \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-7735-0786-8)

A popular movement involving formal public storytelling has developed throughout the western world in recent years. North American participants refer to it as a "storytelling revival," and it consists largely of highly literate, middle-class people, the majority of whom do not feel that they were raised in storytelling backgrounds. Though they talk about informal performance at home among family and friends, their central venue is the formal presentation to an audience. This movement has generated a great number of professionals and semi-professionals; traditional tellers are usually unrecognized or ignored, with notable exceptions. In Canada, these include representatives of minority cultures such as Native peoples and the Gaelic storyteller Joe Neil MacNeil.

Storytelling revivalists are united by a love of stories and desire to give them life through oral telling. A group in Toronto with a fluctuating membership has gathered at "One Thousand and One Friday Nights of Storytelling" since 1978 without missing a single Friday, according to their tradition. Dan Yashinsky, a founder and important influence on the movement in Toronto, has compiled *Tales for an Unknown City*, a sampling from the rich and varied selection which he has heard at these Friday nights. Yashinsky states that his purpose is to "make a record of this community of city-dwelling storytellers" (10). Those involved in "One Thousand and One Friday Nights of Storytelling" comprise a folk group with its own oral traditions, much as engineering students or firefighters do. However, the group is part of a larger subculture involved in storytelling internationally and its storytelling style is influenced more by written than by oral culture. *Tales for an Unknown City* documents some of the types of stories told as part of a storytelling movement, far removed from the traditional Canadian storytelling found in such popular sources as Joan Finnegan's books or *Cape Breton's Magazine*.